

# **Executive Summary**

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## **Region 5 Internal Management Consultation**

Benjamin de Haan, Ph.D.

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### **Background**

Between January and June of 2008, four maltreatment related child fatalities occurred in families known to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration in Pierce County. These unusual events were preceded by a highly visible, non-fatal case in 2007 which prompted community members, most notably law enforcement, to publicly question the agency's ability to protect children in Pierce County. At the same time, within DSHS, questions arose as to whether the leadership team in the region was doing enough to protect children. Within the Children's Administration (CA) there was a prevailing view that Region 5 staff (Pierce and Kitsap Counties) staff had, over time, developed divergent risk assessment practices. Further, leaders in DSHS and CA expressed concern about the region's willingness to accept feedback, both from the community and staff in the state office.

### **Key Questions**

- How effective is the current leadership team?
- Is the CA Region 5 leadership on the correct path to creating a culture where child safety is the highest priority goal?
- Are there sufficient planning mechanisms?
- What are the methods for assuring quality and consistency in approach to services?
- Is staff receptive to outside ideas regarding their child welfare practice?
- Are additional structural changes indicated?
- How are expectations communicated to staff throughout the organization?
- How effective are the channels of communication with community stakeholders and policy makers?
- What could/should the relationship be with legislators and other policy-makers?
- Does Region 5 have different metrics regarding child safety/removal decisions
- How clear are the regional priorities?
- What was the impact of the structural changes which created the East and West Pierce county offices and other changes in Kitsap County?

## **Methods**

The internal review relied on four sources of information:

1. **Key informant interviews** were conducted in February of 2009 with a number of stakeholders selected by the consultant. Participants included: Robin Arnold-Williams, former Secretary of DSHS; Kari Burrell, Policy Advisor to Governor Christine Gregoire; State Representative Ruth Kagi, Cheryl Stephani, former Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration; Mary Meinig, Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, Sharon Gilbert, Deputy Director, Field Operations, Children's Administration, and Randy Hart, former Interim Asst. Secretary, Children's Administration.
2. **Structured Individual Interviews** were held on March 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> of 2009, with each member of the Regional Executive Leadership team. Participants responded to twelve prepared questions which were linked conceptually to the areas identified above. Questions 1 through 4 dealt with leadership orientation and accountability; questions 5, 6 and 7 focused on practice philosophy and consistency; question 8 dealt with access to work-related information; question 9 asked respondents for their judgment about community expectations of DCFS; question 10 asked respondents to identify areas requiring change; question 11 addressed regional effectiveness and question 12, the final interview question asked for perceptions of regional organizational culture.
3. **Focus Groups** with a randomly selected stratified sample of direct service staff (Appendix D) were conducted on April 20, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> of 2009. DCFS direct service staff were interviewed in Tacoma and Bremerton using a traditional focus group format. Group participants were selected by the consultant from an organizational chart, representing all service units in both Kitsap and Pierce counties. The sample included approximately 65 participants, none of whom were known to the consultant. Six focus groups, comprised of ten to eleven participants each, were conducted over two days by a single facilitator (Benjamin de Haan). All groups responded to a standardized set of questions using the same group protocols. Groups were scheduled for 1.5 hours, although many ran well over the allotted time. Participants were given assurances that the information from focus groups would be organized thematically and there would be no individual attributions. Each group responded to eight questions. Questions 1 and 2 dealt with perceived strengths and weakness in the region's approach to child welfare services; question 3 pertained to individual perceptions of support to do their job; question 4 addressed the workers understanding of and commitment to the current practice model (Solution Based Casework); question 5 addressed the perceived effects of the recent restructure; question 6 addressed the clarity of expectations and the role of supervision; question 7 was related to practice consistency and the final question dealt with cultural and class bias in child welfare services. At the end of each session participants were also encouraged to add anything overlooked in the earlier discussion.

## **4. A review of a variety of internal documents**

## **Results**

### **Key Informant Perspective**

- Key informants believe that Region 5 is demographically and culturally distinct from the other regions in the state in that the region is more likely to produce complex cases which lead to controversy in the community.
- These perceived demographic differences, combined with the region's historical insularity has affected the public's confidence in the statewide consistency and predictability of the public child welfare system.
- Region 5's child welfare practices have been at variance with the other regions and inconsistent with statewide norms; this will take time to mitigate.
- The Regional Administrator has taken a number of important steps by asking for outside feedback and participation. Additional external participation in the region is necessary to increase staff receptivity to new practice concepts.
- Smaller more community oriented offices and a renewed focus on child protection are steps in the right direction.
- There is a renewed emphasis on child safety and partnerships with local communities in responding to child maltreatment. This is welcomed but could have occurred earlier.
- The Regional Administrator knows what good child welfare practice is; she has high standards. She is willing to stand up for what is right and she has made some tough decisions.
- External partners have felt a palpable shift in the attitudes of the regional staff. They are more willing to listen to other's points of view, and it appears they are making major improvements with community interest groups.
- Another high visibility case is inevitable. State leaders should resist the temptation to make unilateral decisions affecting the region or state based upon one case unless it is representative of a pattern in practice that must immediately be addressed.
- Strengthening the existing team and establishing more effective quality assurance and training is a more effective long term strategy

### **Region 5 Leadership Team Interviews : Four Themes**

#### **1. Organizational Culture**

- The team acknowledged the region has been historically resistant to outside ideas and there is strong desire to create an organizational culture that is more receptive.
- The team recognizes that the region has developed a crisis oriented culture, one that is more focused on fixing mistakes than preventing them.
- There is a great deal of fear, at all levels in the organization. Leaders understand that because child protection and child welfare services require predictions about human

behavior, mistakes are inevitable. They are concerned that the regional leadership team may not be able to influence the political consequences of mistakes.

## 2. Leadership and Team Dynamics

- With few exceptions, managers see themselves as critical thinkers and leaders within their individual spheres of influence, not simply implementers of initiatives from above. They believe they have a high level of flexibility within the region for developing strategies that implement state policy and they believe they have the ability to personally influence their work.
- The business office should be more engaged in the region's planning process by bringing budget and business tools into better alignment with program planning and decision-making. This requires additional skills beyond monitoring financial transactions and avoiding fiscal mistakes.
- The Deputy Administrator's position could be better utilized. The Deputy RA has a variety of assignments and is seen as a supportive member of the team, but the position could focus more on the overall administration of the Region.
- The Regional Administrator's expectations are exceedingly high and not everyone can meet these expectations.
- The recent restructure (creation of the East and West Pierce offices) will require a much higher level of coordination among the team. Some relationships within the teams must be strengthened for the region to be successful.

## 3. Practice Philosophy

- The Region 5 leadership team has a high level of child welfare experience and strongly held beliefs about what progressive child welfare practices should include. There is a strong, authentic commitment to helping children and families.
- The leadership team is very clear that child safety is the highest priority for the region and the state.
- The leadership team acknowledges there are substantial differences in day to day practice decisions among the team members and probably throughout the region. They believe this is an area of concern for staff at all levels in the Region. The team is unclear about what systems are necessary to ensure practice consistency.
- The Solution Based Casework (SBC) practice model may eventually reduce variation in practice but the team believes there is still a great deal of work needed for successful implementation. The team is concerned that that direct service staff doesn't understand and use the SBC principles consistently. This has been exacerbated by delays in training for solution based casework and problems with the implementation of the new data system.

#### 4. Managing External Relationships

- The team members generally believe that their accomplishments are not fully recognized by external stakeholders (this impression was supported in the key informant interviews and in the focus groups)
- Team members recognize the importance of developing strong external relationships with legislators, the community, and state office but they are not clear about the best approach and what limitations have been placed on these activities at the state level. Some team members suggested training and coaching in this area to help the team develop the necessary skills.
- There is a pervasive belief among the team that the community knows very little about child welfare services, but most community members would have a negative view of the role of the agency.
- The team would like to see a clear plan for community and external partner engagement which included ways to measure progress.

#### Staff Focus Groups: Three Major Themes

##### 1. Organizational Climate

- Most participants agreed that the agency does excellent work due to staff commitment to working with families despite lack of resources and changing expectations.
- Effectively protecting children while treating families fairly is a widely held value in the region.
- Workers perceive a very high level of support and collegiality from co-workers.
- Communication among front line staff is effective and supportive.
- The region has a culture in which the daily press of business makes longer term planning impossible. One member of a focus group observed that the regional leadership team was “so consumed with managing today, that no one was managing tomorrow.”

##### 2. Approach to Working with Families

- Supervisors are often too busy to be effective at case consultation and providing feedback to workers.
- Workers would like to see more clarity about expectations and more frequent feedback about how their work compares with others.
- Workers believe that they are free to work in ways that are respectful of individual cultural differences.
- Many workers agree that they can predict case direction based upon which unit a case is assigned to (i.e. given similar facts, some units are more likely to seek court involvement, others more likely to offer in-home services and others are more likely to screen cases out)

- Many believe that area administrators need to do more work on resolving practice differences across units.
- Much of the general staff training offered is not seen as helpful. Locally developed training is of higher quality and more relevant to local training needs.
- Staff is very clear that child safety is the highest priority. They are not always clear how to implement that value in complex situations where there are competing recommendations for actions.
- Direct service staff believes that Solution Based Casework (the new practice model) has not had much of an effect yet in creating greater practice consistency. Many believe that the implementation was seriously flawed due to delays in the timing and the quality of the training.

### 3. Communication

- Workers generally hold the regional leadership team in high regard and recognize that they have a difficult job to do.
- Workers would like the regional leadership team to spend time on the “bigger picture” and on planning for the future.
- The Regional Administrator is seen as approachable and fair but front line staff would like more information about the overall direction she is headed.
- Even though time is scarce, workers would like greater authentic participation in regional planning activities and work groups.
- FamLink (the new data system) has had a pronounced, negative effect on workers ability to get their job done.
- The creation of the two Pierce offices was poorly implemented.
- Participants expressed the desire to spend more time engaged in longer term planning, and they particularly wanted more contact with the Regional Administrator.

## **Recommendations: Four General Areas Need Attention**

### **1. Leadership**

- **Strengthen the Deputy Regional Administrator position** to operate in a more explicit leadership capacity within the team. This would allow the number two position to make decisions, and act more clearly in the absence of the R.A. thus freeing up the regional administrator to focus on communicating regional goals internally and externally. The deputy administrator could also take the lead on establishing a more systematic quality assurance/planning process.
- **A vacancy in June 2009 in the Business Manager position provides an opportunity** to better integrate budget and business planning in the region’s strategic planning. This is

particularly crucial if the overall direction is to move services closer to the community, or if there are other structural changes as a result of the state's looming revenue shortfall.

- **Assess the overlapping responsibility of two managers in Bremerton.** While it is understood that there is more work than a single AA can handle, reassignment of duties in support of the region may be possible.
- **A concerted training effort is needed** to familiarize the rest of the team with the political dynamics at the state legislature, the role the agency leaders play vis a vis the governor's office, and the role of community advocacy in improving child welfare services.
- **Overcoming the perception that the region is not amenable to new ideas** will take time and persistence. Inviting other regional staff and practice consultants to the table, modeling openness and inclusiveness to staff, setting expectations for increased openness with the executive team, and avoiding defensiveness during the inevitable outside reviews will ultimately pay dividends.
- **Performance/outcomes (progress towards goals) could be shared more widely and routinely.** As an example another child welfare agency with whom I am working is now publishing performance measures monthly directly on the web and encouraging feedback about how to get better results.

## **2. Community Engagement**

- **Develop a written communication plan with measurable communications goals.** This plan should also define a limited number of key messages and assign responsibility for managing and prioritizing relationships with community stakeholders. When one considers the number of interactions each day between CA staff and the community, the opportunity to get key messages out that the agency would like stakeholders to know is enormous.
- **Create a simple community survey and develop a consistent schedule for administering it.** This could take the form of a simple "report card" in which community members rate the agency on a small number of issues. These measures could potentially be included on agency regional dashboard.
- **Identify additional "listening posts"** where community players have an opportunity to interact regularly with key regional personnel.
- **Children's Administration should include community organizing and relationship building skills in the training academy for new staff and newly promoted supervisors and managers**

- **Emphasize community organizing and relationship building skills** in the individual performance plans for key staff.

### 3. Planning

- **Assign responsibility to a high level leader for implementing the elements in an integrated strategic plan**, and use the plan to guide subsequent leadership decisions as well as to hold key leaders within the organization accountable.
- **Consider using an action research model, design teams or some other recognized strategic planning process** to develop a yearly plan of operations and to increase staff participation in decisions.
- **Further engage staff at all levels in authentic planning processes**

### 4. Quality Assurance

- **Create and maintain a *current* child outcomes dashboard.** One such model uses the instrument cluster on an automobile as a metaphor. A limited number of gauges offer the most critical information to the driver without overwhelming him/her with interesting but non-critical information.
- **Create and maintain a separate dashboard for mission critical internal functions** that reflects information necessary at multiple levels in the organization. These dashboards usually focus on critical internal business processes which can be identified through a formal approach often referred to a *business process mapping*. Examples could include timeliness of court reports, processing of payments to vendors, completion of performance appraisals, number of community meetings, etc.
- **Assign responsibility for quality assurance functions** at or near the top of the regional organization.
- **Create a specific quality assurance strategy using case vignettes to reduce/ explain variation in practice.** Results can be used to increase practice consistency with supervisors and AAs. Information derived from these activities can also shape training curricula at the state and regional level



### **Three Highest Priority Recommendations**

1. Immediately focus on quality assurance, using case vignettes to reduce practice variations, particularly in screening decisions. Use the information to train front line supervisors.
2. Create a specific and measurable community outreach plan and monitor it closely.
3. Develop and use a child outcomes dashboard to assess service effectiveness and to guide decision-making.